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MacGuffins, Murakami and My Thing: A Discussion of an Un-named Thing as a Device and an Introduction to Affect Studies Applied to Short Fiction

John D. Rutter

1 Often a material object or *thing* is used in a short story as a means of communicating something about the emotions of a character in an indirect way, and these objects can be, according to Raymond Carver, embedded with immense power (24). In the short stories of Haruki Murakami, there are mysterious happenings (disappearing elephants and talking cats and frogs) and the author seems determined not to directly explain exactly what it is that the character seeks or feels. This essay will focus on two stories from his collection *After the Quake*. In both an essential part of the meaning is inferred through the use of a mysterious box. By considering the use of un-named objects in the light of established theory about the short story from O'Connor, May, Welty and others it will be shown that the use of an intangible un-named object can be connected to established thought about the form.

2 Thing Theory may begin to inform about the role of these objects which cannot be explained by the defined meaning of an object used for its accepted use. Further, there are links to Affect Studies as these objects, which are not translated by known representations, resist codification and as a consequence so do the stories in which they appear. This essay will consider the texts, published criticism and Murakami's own comments leading to short discussion of Thing Theory and consideration of Affect Studies. A few examples from other stories will be included, followed by a brief consideration of my own poetics and how the use of an un-named object (in one story also the contents of a box) relates to an author's intentions. It is proposed that a line of enquiry about the affective dimensions of a story may be explored further as a new

perspective on the short stories of Murakami and may have wider implications for exploration of the form.

3 The stories I will consider are both from Haruki Murakami's collection A*fter the Quake*, first published in 2000 prompted by the Kobe earthquake of 1995 which, along with a terrorist attack in the same year, prompted Murakami to return to Japan from the United States. In each of the stories, a box seems intrinsically linked to some unstated and undefined emotion going to the central themes of the book about loss, memory and reflections on a life changed forever by a tragedy. As he later told the *New York Times*, Murakami was disturbed by how both events were rendered banal, or as he put it, "consumed in a sea of media coverage" (interview with Anderson).This prompted him to write *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*, a non-fiction attempt to create a more coherent narrative of the attack. He spent a year interviewing dozens of victims and perpetrators (interview with Anderson). He felt there was too little attention paid to the victims and that one story alone could not account for the whole country.

4 As he explains in the introduction to the book, he was attempting "to create a more coherent narrative of the attack, so that readers could better understand the drama in personal terms" (qtd. in Lewis). Many of the characters respond indirectly to the earthquake and their ambivalent responses are used to question how the disaster impacted on lives all over Japan. Toby Litt described to me the challenge of writing about a disaster within the context of his own approach to writing short stories, describing an example of a train accident that was widely written about. "It wasn't worth writing unless you were to fuck with it in a significant way" (Rutter 32). This essay will not explore writing about trauma in detail—that has been widely covered in post 9/11 discussions—but here there is an indication that Litt also wishes to avoid direct or obvious explanations when complex emotions are present following trauma.

5 In a recent interview discussing "The Wind Cave," Murakami gives a clue as to his approach to trauma:

> There are three types of emotional wounds: those that heal quickly, those that take a long time to heal, and those that remain with you until you die. I think one of the major roles of fiction is to explore as deeply and in as much detail as possible the wounds that remain. Because those are the scars that, for better or for worse, define and shape a person's life. And stories—effective stories, that is—can pinpoint where a wound lies, define its boundaries (often, the wounded person isn't actually aware that it exists), and work to heal it. (Interview with Treisman)

6 In "UFO in Kushiro," the opening story in the collection, Haruki Murakami uses a MacGuffin, a term attributed to Alfred Hitchcock, an object whose true nature is immaterial to the plot but which may nonetheless drive nonetheless the plot. In this story, the central character, Komura, is left by his wife after she has spent five days watching the aftermath of the earthquake on television. She leaves a note saying that being married to him is like living with a "chunk of air" (Murakami 4). He takes a week off work and agrees to deliver a package to a colleague's sister, ". . . a box like the ones used for human ashes only smaller, wrapped in manila paper . . . " (Murakami 7). The colleague tells him "It weighs practically nothing" (6). He travels to freezing Hokkaido stating that "hot or cold, it was all the same to him" (6). He meets the sister and her friend and drinks coffee which is "more sign than substance" (12). He questions what the box contains with the sister's friend who tells him in a low voice that the box contains "the *something* that was inside you . . . now you'll never get it back." *Something*

is italicised in the text (19) drawing attention to the very fact that whatever was inside the character may not be defined. He has a feeling that he is about to commit an act of "overwhelming violence," and she quickly retracts saying that she was joking. The story ends with him saying that he feels he has come a very long way and her statement "you're just at the beginning" (19).

7 In an interview for the *Paris Review* Murakami said that he likes to leave everything open. In another interview for *The New Yorker* he said that "when I finish a story it runs into another." There is no doubt that he is being deliberately open-ended, and no firm conclusion can be made about the story's meaning. The reader can only glean that some unfathomable mystery exists. The author is addressing a broader impact, a set of responses that cannot easily be represented. In another interview, for the *New York Times*, he describes his own creativity as a "black box" to which he has no conscious access.

8 Perhaps the author himself cannot say precisely what the box contains. Certainly he is evading any clarity about the emotion represented. Charles E. May has discussed the way in which Murakami avoids his characters expressing any emotion and highlights the way Murakami shows the emptiness inside the character (May, *Brother* 227). May talks of the "mysterious realm" and how characters in a story encounter the most basic mysteries of human experience (*Brother* 70).

9 Chekhov said, "One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off" (Goldberg 163). If the box in "UFO in Kushiro" did contain, for example someone's ashes, a particular family heirloom, a necklace, or any other specific named object, then the mystery is at least partially resolved. The object has to be employed for the thing it is whether intended by the author or not. The reader is confronted with a specific set of images, meanings and contexts that relate to a particular noun. It seems that Murakami is reaching for an altogether less definable truth and that the short story is his favoured medium for the illusive.

10 M. John Harrison alludes to a similar mystery and introduces the concept of absence, echoing the thoughts of May. He says that his stories are "items in a container of unlabelled material from someone else's life' and discusses 'a deliberate intention to illustrate human values by describing their absence." The concept of absence has been widely used in discussion of short fiction. In the introduction to his seminal work *The Lonely Voice*, Frank O'Connor discusses verisimilitude stating that there are as many ways of expressing verisimilitude as there are authors "but no way of explaining its absence, no way of saying 'at this point the character's behaviour becomes inexplicable'" (13). He goes on to explain how the short story is an organic form that 'springs from a single detail (21). This leads to questions about what happens if the focal point is an object with no name, and the truth and clear definitions are absent from the text. Here the vital single detail is a nameless *thing*.

11 Heidegger argues that an 'object' becomes a 'thing' when it ceases to serve its common function (78). That is certainly what is taking place in Murakami's story. A simple box takes on characteristics that may convey the character's desire more accurately than if the content of the box were known. Bill Brown explains in his essay "Thing Theory":

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls . . . The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-

> object relation. As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects . . . above all, what they disclose about us, but we only catch a glimpse of things.

12 This focus on the glimpse goes directly to previous discussion of the short story. William Trevor described the short story as essential art:

> I think it is the art of the glimpse. If the novel is like an intricate Renaissance painting, the short story is an impressionist painting. It *should* be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. (Interview with Stout)

13 Raymond Carver refers to VS Pritchett's definition of a "something glimpsed," stating: "The short story writer's task is to invest the glimpse with all that is in his power" (27). Here there is a possible alignment between the concept of Thing Theory and accepted wisdom on the short story. Both make a relationship between something undefined or an object unseen, and the subject. It is the relationship between the subject or character and the object that matters, not the name of the object.

14 However, there are limitations. Critics of Thing Theory, including Severin Fowles of Columbia University, have attempted to relate the concept to literature and culture. Fowles describes a blind spot in Thing Theory, which he attributes to attention to physical presence. He says it fails to address the influence of "non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps—absences, in other words, that also stand before us as entity-like presences with which we must contend." For example, Fowles explains how a human subject is required to understand the difference between a set of keys and a missing set of keys, yet this anthropocentric awareness is absent from Thing Theory. This approach then is not sufficient to address the question of the un-named object.

15 Returning to Murakami, the story "Honey Pie" ends *After the Quake.* This story begins with a man called Junpei telling a short story to a child, Sala, about a bear. Sala believes that the "Earthquake Man" is going to put her in a little box. We learn that Junpei, the child's mother, Sayoko and her eventual husband, Takatsuki, were university friends and that Junpei never acted on his feelings towards her. Eventually he decides to act and protect the now separated Sayoka and her daughter and writes a story with a happy ending about bears making honey pies. It is an optimistic, redeeming story on which to end the collection and has the added relevance in that its principle character is a short story writer. Junpei resolves to write a different kind of story, "I want to write about people who dream and wait for the night to end," he says, "who long for the light so they can hold the ones they love" (132). He commits that he will never let anyone put the woman and the girl in a box. Perhaps this is the author himself trying to offer some kind of hope. May sums up this positive end: "Thus, although these stories seem distinct entities, they are interconnected not only by the effect of the Kobe earthquake, but also because they move from meaninglessness to final hope" (May, *On the Short Story*). One aspect of the story that shows complexity beyond this redeeming conclusion is that Junpei's parents, from whom is estranged, are still living in Kobe, yet he chooses not to contact them suggesting that his own loneliness is self-imposed. This fear and the claustrophobia imagined by the child are repeated in "Landscape with Flatiron" in which the character is trapped in a tight dark place (a refrigerator—another kind of box), and no-one can hear his screams. "It might not be so bad if I could suffocate" (Murakami 40).

16 In the *Guardian*'s review of the collection, Alex Clark states that 'by subtly linking each of these pieces to a central theme—that of fragmentation itself—it demonstrates that snatches of narrative might, in the end, be all that we can truthfully claim rights over." Clark goes on to suggest that in the world following the earthquake and terrorist attack which Murakami wrote about in the non-fiction work *Underground*, Murakami detects a "world devoid of light," a narrative arena where "meaning itself broke down." In these dazzlingly elegant stories, Clark says, Murakami restores some of the light and some of the meaning, arguing that the possibility of moments of optimism and connection is not something we should take for granted.

17 None of these readings seems to be tangible or simple enough in realistic narrative, and the presence of a mysterious box again seems an indirect way of identifying some vague sense of dread. Paul March-Russell discusses the use of the fantastic in urban tales stating how Murakami, in "Super-Frog saves Tokyo," from the same collection, describes in oblique terms the trauma felt within the Japanese psyche following the Kobe earthquake. He argues that the use of the fantastic by Murakami, Will Self and China Mieville allows them to discuss the effect of trauma and the city as a place of hidden secrets (161).

18 Graham Mort believes that what prevents short stories from being merely "lumps of prose" is their ability to engage the reader. It is the reader's imagination that completes the story (9). I would argue that the added mystery created by not defining the object in the box in 'UFO in Kushiro' supports this intangible way of engaging the reader better than a less obscure, named object ever could.

19 This device has been employed by some of the masters of the form. The adolescent boy in Joyce's Araby seeks a gift for a girl. He promises to bring her "something" (14). His desire is clear, but the object is not named and its absence goes to the failure to understand his own feelings. Had he sought something specific the emphasis of the story would change. As it is the reader is left focussing on the emotions of the character. This has a different sense to a story in which an inanimate object is named such as Angela Carter's "The Man Who Loved a Double Bass." Carter does not spell out her intentions, but in this early story the double bass must be a metaphor for something, which in turn puts some limitations on the possible interpretations available to the reader. She even states that the double bass "was mother, father, wife, child and mistress to him..." (3). Ann Beattie's "Janus" is about a bowl which is used as a device to indirectly address unstated losses by the protagonist. The character says "It is just a bowl" (337) but Charles E May says that the bowl represents conflicts "that cannot be expressed directly and discursively, but rather must be embodied in a seemingly trivial object" (May, *On the Short Story*). However, like Carter, the author has used an object with known uses. By not giving recognisable clues to the reader Murakami achieves a continuing sense of intrigue and challenges the reader to fathom the mystery and giving the thing greater impact.

20 More recently, Chuck Palahnuik's "The Nightmare Box" is a MacGuffin employed in the collection *Haunted* (2005). It is provided with a physical description including a peephole through which different characters use a switch to create a flash of light revealing an image which causes insanity to the viewer. The view is described as "a glimpse of the real reality." This glimpse of truth seems to relate to earlier discussion of the short story, but perhaps the device is a more conventional MacGuffin used as a mechanism to move the book forward. It may be considered almost opposite in style to

Murakami with stories in which there are a great many plot events, and sex and violence are explicit. In *Haunted*, the characters are not responding to a trauma, they are self-destructive. Little is left to the reader's imagination and critics have criticised the shock value suggesting that "Palahniuk sometimes seems to be operating under the presumption that he can never sink too low, or vomit up too much" (Robinson).

21 In contrast, Murakami's stories are controlled and reserved and the trauma at the heart of *After the Quake* is never directly raised with the author preferring to avoid realism. According to the *Paris Review*, world is an allegorical one, constructed of familiar symbols—an empty well, an underground city—but the meaning of those symbols remains hermetic to the last. This justifies the author's choice of un-named objects. He has stated "I don't like the realistic style, myself. I prefer a more surrealistic style" (interview with Wray) He goes on to explain that this is a personal process. "...when I write fiction I go to weird, secret places in myself. What I am doing is an exploration of myself—inside myself" (interview with Wray).

22 It is a consistent theme in Murakami's interviews. "People are always asking me about the books: 'What do you mean by this; what do you mean by that?' But I cannot explain anything at all. I talk about myself, and I talk about the world, metaphorically, and you cannot explain or analyse metaphors—you just have to accept the form" (interview with Sarah Lyall). It seems that Murakami is unwilling to explain his intentions suggesting that a more diffuse discourse might be worth exploring. The character in "Honey Pie" may be feeling loss, fear, loneliness, self-imposed exile, being trapped or a complex composite series of emotions, some of which represent national feeling and exist outside of him. Perhaps the engagement that Mort speaks of comes from unexpected emotions or a different type of affect altogether.

23 At this point the concept of Affect Studies might be investigated as an alternative and potentially enlightening way of considering these texts. In the situation where there are complex relationships between subject and object this relatively new field of thought may give a fresh perspective. Several scholars have begun to discuss how this might be applied to literary interpretation.

24 In *Contemporary Fiction and the End of the Novel*, Pieter Vermeulen discusses the difference between codified and cognitively available feelings. He argues that genres function by activating and frustrating generic expectations allowing unexpected emotions to emerge (7). Affect, according to the Deleuzian definition is about non-cognitive and non-representational intensities that take place outside of consciousness. This goes directly to Murakami's statement about feelings to which he has no conscious access, that is unable to explain. Vermeulen acknowledges that the distinctions between emotion and affect are complex and explains the way Deleuze separates the two: "While affects are non-cognitive and non-representational intensities that take place outside of consciousness, emotions emerge when such intensities are narrativized, named, and represented as part of individual experience" (Vermeulen 8). Two aspects of this are relevant in attempts to understand Murakami's box. Firstly that affect is not limited to individual subjects—and Murakami has stated that he is addressing the feelings of the whole nation—and, secondly, that individual emotional interpretations rely to some extent on naming. Vermeulen goes on to argue that when novels deny conventional scenarios and therefore the cultural influence of the fiction, "they make room for unrecognized and un-owned affects that operate outside of the subjective domain of consciously codified emotion" (Greenwald Smith 428).

25 Vermeulen states that the tension between emotional codification and affective solicitation applies to "all literary works." Little has been said about how specifically that works in the short story. Using the example of Murakami's stories, it seems that this approach may indeed be a way of interpreting them. There are intensities beyond the conscious emotions of the characters. The overwhelming violence felt by the character in "UFO in Kushiro" is an inadequate attempt to express a series of powerful and conflicting emotions. One of the ways Vermeulen describes the way these emotions taking place outside of codification is to call them "after-affects." This triggers a connection with Eudora Welty's description: "Some stories leave a train of light behind them, meteor-like, so that much later than they strike our eyes we may see their meaning like an after-effect" (7). Perhaps these after-affects are more significant in the short story, which, in the absence of a resolved plot-arc behaves differently to the novel.

26 Citing Jameson, Vermeulen discusses the elusive way this affective dimension "eludes language and its naming of things" which connects to the notion that the short story defies definition. Throughout Vermeulen's book there is a theme "that formal innovations shape a reimagining of agency and subjectivity" (14). It could be argued that the short story is less imprisoned by formal structure and convention than the novel. However, he argues, there is a risk that the insistence that affect resists critique and the overlap between consciousness and affect could allow this approach to be exempt from critique itself.

27 The emphasis of Vermeulen's text is the novel and he refers to Watt's definition that the novel differs from mythology in its "concern with the daily lives of ordinary people" (59). Perhaps affect may have even greater relevance in the short story where often only a slice of life or a moment is represented, though as O'Connor has pointed out, short stories are very much about the lives of ordinary people, submerged populations.

28 A different perspective on affect is presented in *Networked Affect* edited by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit. Their emphasis is on technological networks. Discussion of John Law's research focuses on the need for ambiguity when addressing complex topics. Law insists on resisting the imperatives of coherence and neatness when addressing phenomena that are complex, diffuse, and messy, and on incorporating some of this messiness into scholarly practice, since "much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all" (2). That description seems relevant to the confused state of Japan that Murakami is trying to represent.

29 Hillis also applies Sara Ahmed's ideas of "stickiness" to media and online debate, citing Ahmed's definition "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs." Ahmed's essay *Happy Objects* is much cited in this field and makes a connection between emotion, affect and objects. Ahmed discusses the "messiness of the experiential" and how some objects themselves are "sticky." She also states that "certain objects become imbued with positive affect" (in Gregg 34). This can be directly linked to Carver's statement about objects. Ahmed discusses the state of relations and passage of forces and intensities and addresses language itself. "language works as a form of power in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together, by the way they move us" (195). Perhaps the use of un-

named objects increases this stickiness by refusing codification and drawing attention to the mystery this implies.

30 Ruth Leys' recent *The Ascent of Affect* draws together many strands of thought on affect including intentionality. She summarises Griffith's and DeLancey's philosophies on cognition—that cognitive theories are compelling when an emotion is "about" something and the differentiation between the object that a state is aimed at or a concrete *thing* or *concretum.* (15).

31 It seems that this field of research may be relevant in the quest for understanding the complex interactions between subject and object. However, it is not possible in this brief discussion to superimpose these ideas on the stories of Murakami with any authority. Some of these concepts offer an enticing suggestion that affect might be explored further when, as in the case in hand, conventional discourse about complex emotions in a story seems inadequate or at least an over-simplification. Further, there are implications for reception theory and cognitive approaches as Affect Studies moves the focus to non-cognitive affect.

32 Having explored the application of these ideas to Murakami, there may be some value in briefly considering my own poetics. I am at least able to make assertions about the author's intent and make no apology for being affected by Murakami's short stories.

33 I have used the same device—an un-named object—in two short stories. An envelope of unknown contents is the object of desire in "John's Thing," a story in which a middle-aged man has questions about his recently deceased father, and "Our Lady's Toes," a story from the same collection which takes place in a headmaster's office where an unidentified gift in a box appears at a critical moment. Like Murakami's collection, the stories address the kind of emotional wounds that remain for a lifetime and which the author cannot explain or may not even be aware of. The short story may be a means of pinpointing where those wounds come from and their affects.

34 In "John's Thing" (Rutter), middle aged John rummages through his father's shed (nicknamed as New Shed since 1974). The physical thing he seeks is a heavy object in a manila envelope. I don't know why Murakami's box was wrapped in manila paper; I chose it for its neutrality. The envelope is sealed with Sellotape and bears the words "John's Thing." The character speculates childishly about the possibility that the envelope contains a hand or a gun whilst recalling moments and quotes from his father and his childhood. He doesn't know exactly what it is that he missed because he did not have a fulfilling paternal relationship. Following the same approach as Murakami who is determined not to have characters openly express their emotions, the character, John, pieces together moments of memory and some of the areas where he needed a father. He lingers on thoughts about unstated incidents at school, which his father knew nothing of which took place around the time he saw the object when he was eleven or twelve. The story ends with him wishing he had asked about the thing. Here the *thing* represents non-cognitive and non-representational intensities and these may indeed take place outside of consciousness. The story reflects the retrospective recall of the character decades later. Neither the boy, nor the adult narrator is conscious in any clear way of what these intensities are, nor of course is the author. They cannot be summarised by a simple code such as regret or sadness. Some of the descriptions of the contents of the shed are quite specific with repeated use of military phrases and words linked to imprisonment. These specifics are intentional indicators of the character's pride about his father's National Service and regrets that his father was trapped in a

role caring for his mother. However, the central question about the *thing* goes to an indefinable feeling that sits somewhere in the time between childhood and the present day in the space between author and character.

35 Later in the same cycle, *Approval*, another mysterious gift is employed. "Vitam Impendere Vero Part 2: Our Lady's Toes" takes place in the headmaster's office of a 1970s Catholic boys' school. I have used the second person in an attempt to connect the reader and distance the author and to draw attention to the relationship between reader and writer. During the interview, the deputy headmaster presents a square white box which the boy "you" reluctantly accepts. I chose to give a graphic description of what is about to happen next, with the boy distracting himself by concentrating on the toes of a statue of Our Lady. Here the specific physical object, the statue, indicates established ideas; there is no hidden or unrecognised code. The statue and the serpent have cultural significance that do not need further explanation. There is no doubt about the moral right and wrong of the situation, so that can be personified in known ways. Nor is the story a moral tale. The reason for explaining the abuse explicitly is to remove doubt about whether the abuse of the character actually took place. The mysterious realm that I am exploring is how, many years later, that character interprets the experience and its after-affects. There is no attempt to directly signify guilt, collusion, anger, pain. By using an unconventional point of view and not stating the emotions of the victim this is an example of how formal innovations might shape a reimagining of agency.

36 The un-named gift is intended to ask the reader to consider undefined possibilities. It was a huge challenge to tackle this topic in a way that describes the trauma of that moment and its lifelong after-effects without directly stating emotions. The second person point of view gives fewer opportunities to say how the character feels than a first-person narration. The box may indicate complicity, negotiation, the abuse of power, temptation, all of which are complex concepts for an adolescent. Like Murakami, I see a deep mine of material in the motivations of victims and perpetrators. One concept which I genuinely considered is that the boy may even have lied about these events later in life and fabricated his own abuse either to excuse his own failures (not for financial gain; that seems too simple a motive). I have discounted these possibilities in favour of a clearer picture that abuse took place, but the narrator is unable to explain his response. I still allow the possibility that the boy accepts the abuse because he craves attention of any type in the absence of parental attention, and he wishes to feel included. In any of the possible interpretations, mystery seems better than fact, and the reader can make her or his own mind up and complete the story. I have no doubt that the impact is heightened by leaving the contents of the box a mystery and indicating some level of complicity with the final line.

37 In both of these stories, I believe it is more powerful not to allow the reader to know what the gift is. I have been challenged that as the author I must know, and I do have ideas. I have been unable to find any quotation in which Murakami says what is inside the box in his story, and wonder whether he knows, or even wants to know. In my stories both gifts might have been a camera, the sort of clunky Polaroid instant self-developing cameras that were the must-have item of tech. for a teenage boy in the early 1970s. However to state that the object is a camera (or even to be certain in my own mind that the gift is indeed a camera, and not tell the reader) is limiting. If the object was a camera, the reader is immediately presented with specific metaphors. It

may be something about recording the truth (the *vero* of the title), a black and white record of history, or about shining a light on something, which in turn implies that there is something solid and fixed about what happened or what was missing. That is too simple an interpretation in the same way as the effect of a national disaster on the psyche of the Japanese people cannot be summed up in a simple phrase. The boy in the headmaster's office may be seeking attention; he may not want to be left out; it may even represent some kind of compliance. A photograph may be used evidence of wrong-doing, but closes off some of the more interesting and ambivalent reaction of the victim of abuse.

38 In a similar way the middle-aged man seeking answers in "John's Thing" also cannot say what it is that he seeks. His true object of desire is a relationship with his father, but if thing was a tool, a toy, a gun, or indeed a camera, there would be some clear indication of what that desired relationship might look like and what human value is absent. A known object has a meaning, whereas a *thing* divorced from its known specific purpose may indicate many different feelings or some uncoded affect. He may have wanted affection, authority or simply protection, but he is unable decades later to describe what was missing.

39 Retrospectively I have considered whether Affect Studies might inform my own understanding of these two stories. It is appealing that any aspect of these stories is resistant to critique and that they can escape codification with the limitations of emotion that must follow. It is also intriguing to imagine that some of the impact of the story comes from outside the text. Eudora Welty describes a short story as "lit from outside the story" (Welty, *On Writing* 9); the works are defined by some factor that defies emotional codification. The impact on the character is intended to be greater than any fixed definition of emotion and therefore to move beyond fixed phenomena. It may be that the application of Affect Studies could lead to a new conversation about where the light or energy of the story is situated.

40 So how does this brief exploration of un-named objects inform our understanding? My own thesis *The Only Voice* aimed to define generic characteristics of the short story. The evidence from my research showed that the poetics of each author is unique and that the short story defies having its parts named and explained. It is the very absence of a universal theory that is established from the evidence. Hemingway's theory of omission still applies. A writer, "may omit things he knows and the reader will have a feeling of those things" (qtd. in May, *Artifice* 63). Exploration of the use of un-named things in short stories suggests that there may be value in considering the impact of an object that cannot fulfil a known function because its identity is hidden.

41 The open-ended mystery that Murakami so skilfully achieves is partly gained by not revealing the object of desire either in the sense of clearly stating what the character wants, or by defining the inanimate thing that may represent it. It may be impossible to spell out in a few words exactly what it is that our character desires, especially when addressing the long-lasting impact of trauma, so following Murakami's example and not defining a physical object may be a very useful tool for the author and leave an open-ended interpretation in the hands of the reader. Moreover, the application of Affect Studies and a process that considers the absence of specificity in these stories may open the door to a new perspective. This approach is consistent with established theory about the short story—its illusiveness in particular—but may begin to develop a new conversation. Ultimately, it matters not what is in the box described in

Murakami's stories, nor in my own. By opening up potential interpretations, the author allows a wider and less-defined conclusion and the consideration of the complex and unfathomable affects of an event on a character creates the opportunity to consider affects beyond easily defined emotions or codified meaning. It is proposed that further consideration of affect may be a new means of exploring the short story in the future and that this may contribute to the ongoing narrative about the form.

A Short Story by Haruki Murakami

Vitam Impendere Vero Part II: Our Lady's Toes

42 You are sitting outside the Headmaster's office. Above you, looking down from heaven, are portraits of three Headmasters, all in black. You have an odd thought looking at the gothic frames and the dark eyes of these men. In the film of this story these characters would be played by Peter Cushing, Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee. You think about the film you were allowed to stay up and watch recently, classified 'not suitable' by your mother—*The Wicker Man.* It was the first time you had seen a naked woman on screen. Your dad had a cushion on his lap. You think of Britt Ekland's pubic triangle, her breasts. Another erection is about to be born, your third today. You try to suppress it and look around to check there is no-one coming. The corridor is deserted. No one is malingering, a serious crime, or worse still running. You have already started to have a recurring nightmare about hurrying along these corridors. The dream will stay with you well into your career.

43 Your feet are itchy, and you are sweaty all over from playing twenty-a-side football on the playground with a tennis ball. Football's not allowed. Rugby is the official sport.

44 You feel the portraits staring at you. One of the Brothers will die in a fire at the Brothers' house two years from now. Your mother will insist that you pray for him, and there will be even more Latin masses than usual. There will be whispers about a boy deliberately starting the fire. Decades later you will read about that fire on the Internet with great interest. Will he have screamed 'Oh my God!' like the devout Christian policeman in *The Wicker Man*?

45 Brother Kelly, the last headmaster on the wall, was nicknamed Frankenstein because of his large square head. He stopped you in the corridor once and asked your name. Then he said, "Extraordinary eyes." You still don't know why that felt odd. You told your mother. She looked away and quoted your grandma. "He'll break some hearts with them eyes" that's what my mum always said. Then she blew her nose because her mother had died only days before your last sister was born at Easter. All the will of God, your mother tells you.

46 A coat of arms boasts the school's motto in Latin; *Vitam Impendere Vero.* You do quite well in Latin, so you know it could be translated as, "*To devote life to the truth*," or even, "*To threaten life for the truth.*" Saint Ambrose is quoted under a black and white picture of Blessed Edmund Rice. He has something to do with founding the school. The quote says, "*In some cases silence is dangerous.*" What would you say if you were asked about things you'd seen in the classroom and in the chemistry lab? What are you going to do when you hear about a court case thirty-five years from now?

47 The Headmaster's door creaks open. You feel cold. You've never been in there before. You aren't here for a disciplinary reason, the usual reason boys are sent for, but you have been singled out by Mr Austin, the deputy head teacher. The nominal head, Brother Brady, is as old as a mummy and is never seen. Another boy from your class was sent for recently. His dad was a famous footballer. He doesn't join in the tennis-ball football any more.

48 "Come in, my boy. Accept my apologies for keeping you waiting," he says in educated tones that echo with authority. Bach is playing sotto voce in the background. You will never again be able to listen to Bach without feeling a physical reaction to its measured counterpoint. You will stop playing the piano soon partly because there's always a Bach piece in the exam and you won't even be able to listen to Bach anymore.

49 He looks down on you and smiles.

50 "Don't be afraid."

51 You don't know whether to smile back, so you go half way and feel idiotic. You feel your cheeks warming. You are too old to blush you think but it happens often at school.

52 A giant arm guides you into the office and you wonder how tall Mr Austin must be. You are as tall as most in your class but you scarcely reach his chest. He is wearing a large black cloak, earned because he is a Reverend. He reminds you of Bela Lugosi.

53 You are steered to a leather armchair opposite a grand baroque desk. He takes his place on a throne behind the desk. Jesus looks down sadly from a heavy crucifix above you. You try and remember what the acronym *INRI* on the scroll above His head stands for. A bluebottle hurries around on the blood that stains His crown of thorns. You have to fight an urge to scratch your greasy hair.

54 Mr Austin flicks through a file making noises of approval. He asks you about your piano lessons and your academic performance. You have made good progress in your third year at the school. Your answers are monosyllabic.

55 Through the arched window you spot a crow silently land in the old oak tree on the school drive.

56 He wants to know if there is anything that concerns you. You know you aren't going to say anything about what you saw in the changing rooms after games last week. Are you supposed to tell someone about that? What would happen to you if you did?

57 An ivory statue of the Virgin Mary prays serenely for you on the opposite wall, arms open, palms up. She is crushing a serpent beneath her bare feet. Later you will notice her toes. You will be able to describe those toes in incredible detail far into the future. Whenever your mother brings you a picture of Our Lady when she returns from retreat you will always check the toes.

58 He asks you why you aren't a soloist in the choir. You make a modest comment about not being good enough, but you are lying, that's not the reason. Lying is a venial sin, not a mortal one, but you'll have to confess it. Normally at confession you only have immoral thoughts to confess—four times last week.

59 The music changes from a plodding prelude to an allegro fugue in a minor key as he lowers himself onto the edge of the desk immediately in front of you. His voice has become softer, almost a whisper.

60 “I’d like to take you into a confidence that I keep for certain exceptional boys. I have a gift for you, and I was hoping that you and I could become close, rather like a special parental relationship. I will do everything in my power to help you.”

61 You have no idea what this means, so you gaze up at him without making eye contact.

62 “Yes, sir.”

63 A crucifix on a silver chain dangles from his neck. That would ward off vampires, you think.

64 “I’d like us to have a personal understanding. I want you to promise that anything that is said or takes place here will never leave this room. Do you understand?”

65 You don’t quite follow but you say, “Yes, sir,” again anyway. His hair has a widow’s peak.

66 “Good. Then we understand one another. Now we’re going to have a little chat about God’s gifts, and let’s see where that leads us.”

67 “Yes, sir.”

68 “‘As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace,’” he quotes. “Do you know where that’s from?”

69 “Is it Saint Peter, sir?”

70 “Excellent! It is indeed. Peter 4:10.”

71 You decide against telling him that Peter is your confirmation name.

72 “Now then...”

73 He reaches a monstrous arm behind himself to where a square white box is sitting on the desk. His enormous hand clutches the box like the robotic claws of the remote-controlled crane that fails to pick up prizes in the arcades at Blackpool. His arm scythes through 180 degrees until the box is immediately in front of you. This will be the first of several visits here, though not all will result in gifts.

74 “Go on, son. It’s a gift for you, a reward. I want you to be one of my special boys.” He smiles again. “I’d like us to meet here from time to time. This will be our private time together.”

75 You know by now that something is badly wrong with this conversation but you are unable to understand what. The white box is a few inches from your face, and his black frame blocks out everything else. You feel a powerful hand on your shoulder as you take the box in both hands with a meek, “Thank you, sir.”

76 Once you have opened this box, you will have unwittingly entered into a contract of sorts. You will still be thinking about that far into the next century.

77 In a moment you are going to feel your cheek pressed hard against the desk. Something sharp will dig into your ear but you won’t be able to move. You will be inhaling furniture polish, looking at Our Lady’s feet. The serpent is trapped, choking. You will always feel sick at the smell of furniture polish. You will hear his voice, but you won’t be able to make out any words or produce any of your own. Her toe nails are short, and there is dirt between her toes like the athlete’s foot with which you are afflicted. He is going to roughly tug down your trousers and your white St Michael Y-fronts. He will press down on your back. There is a chip on her left little toe showing the white beneath. You will feel something cold and slimy being rubbed into your anus. What is the statue made of, you’ll wonder? He will grunt as he pushes and shoves and tries to

force himself inside you. Ten toes... ten Hail Marys... Hail Mary, full of grace... He can't quite manage it and seems to be getting angry. You will hear him behind you, his breath becoming more and more hoarse. He will moan, "My God! Christ! Jesus!" It will remind you of the end of *The Wicker Man*. You will feel a warm wet splat on your buttocks.

78 "Open the box, my boy," he says. "Go on, open it."

79 You open the box.

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ABSTRACTS

Un objet matériel ou une chose peut être un moyen puissant de communiquer des émotions intangibles dans une nouvelle, et cela peut être particulièrement vrai si l'objet lui-même n'est pas nommé. Les histoires de Haruki Murakami incluent des éléments mystérieux et dans deux exemples du recueil *After the Quake*, des boîtes dont le contenu est inconnu sont utilisées pour aborder des émotions collectives immatérielles. Ces histoires sont analysées dans le contexte de théories de la nouvelle, de la théorie des choses (*Thing Theory*), et des études autour de l'affect. Une autre perspective est fournie par la poétique des auteurs et l'utilisation d'objets sans nom. Une nouvelle de l'auteur est ensuite proposée comme illustration. L'auteur suggère que la prise en compte de l'affect est un domaine de recherche fertile pour mieux comprendre le mystère de la nouvelle.

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John D. Rutter is a short story writer and academic. His PhD thesis, *The Only Voice* (Edge Hill University), analysed the role of the author in the short story and his research interests are around the relationship between reader, writer, text and context. His stories have been published in a variety of anthologies, chapbooks and websites. He has worked at the University of Southampton, Edge Hill University and UCLan, and he is currently teaching short stories for Comma Press.